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DevCon and Culture

1200 developers get a taste of VFP 7 and DevCons past.

By Tamar E. Granor, Editor

I recently read an article by Larry Wall, creator of the Perl scripting language. He discussed the importance of community for a language. His view is that "a language without a culture is dead."

As I read this, I couldn't help but think of FoxPro. Five years ago, the trade magazines proclaimed loudly that FoxPro was dead, that there'd be no further upgrades. In the years since, there's been a similar proclamation at least once a year.

Despite the pundits, FoxPro's not dead. In fact, since the first gloom and doom article appeared, Microsoft has released three new "integer" versions of the product, several interim versions and a number of service packs. Pretty good for a "dead language."

Equally importantly, after some hard times due to the scare and to the giant leap from FoxPro 2.x to VFP, the FoxPro community and culture are stronger than ever.

I spent the last week at the ultimate celebration of FoxPro culture, DevCon. Over 1200 FoxPro developers made their way to Palm Springs to celebrate the 10th International FoxPro Developers Conference. The anniversary was the theme for the week, so the keynote address reviewed highlights of DevCons past. In addition, the conference t-shirt includes a list of all the DevCons (think rock concert here), FoxPro originator Dr. Dave Fulton's keynote address from the 1989 DevCon was shown at one of the bonus sessions, and ribbons indicating the number of DevCons attended were distributed.

Of course, DevCon didn't only celebrate the past; it featured a look at the future as well. Randy Brown and Calvin Hsia of Microsoft demo'ed a few of the features planned for VFP 7 (code named "Sedona") and the dates and location for DevCon 2000 were announced.

Randy and Calvin's demo focused on improvements to the IDE (Interactive Development Environment). They showed a number of features to make us all more productive. Here's a sampling. Several features have been adapted from Word such as AutoText/AutoCorrect (imagine typing "DC " and having a whole DEFINE CLASS … ENDCLASS structure popped into your editing window), Change Case (like the one in the January Advisor Answers column, but native) and setting bookmarks. Others make it easier to organize your screen real estate – various of the development windows can be docked together and the debugging windows can be put into a single pageframe with tabs at the bottom.

Microsoft also showed off VFP version's of IntelliSense. Much like other Microsoft tools, VFP 7 will show us the PEMs of the objects we're working with and offer parameters as we write code. Following the Fox community's history of taking features and extending

them, the technique works in other contexts, too. Type USE and a list of the most recently opened tables pops up.

Most of us spent the rest of the week wishing we had those features now, of course. With such terrific improvements in just one area of the product, it should be fun to see what happens to the rest of it. I suspect you'll get that chance at DevCon 11, set for September 24-28, 2000, at the Fountainebleau Hotel in Miami Beach.

The winners of this year's Visual FoxPro Excellence Awards were announced at one of the bonus sessions. The entries were so good that, not only did the four winners demo their apps, but two of the runners-up did as well. There's a list of winners in this issue.

The mix of people at DevCon this year reflected something I've been noticing for a while. A lot of people have moved from FoxPro 2.x to VFP in the last year or so, and a lot of experienced VFP programmers are branching out into other areas like the Internet, DNA, XML and more. DevCon had sessions for both groups, as well as for those comfortable in VFP who wanted to extend their knowledge. There were also quite a few attendees who'd never used any version of FoxPro 2.x, but started with VFP.

As always, the conference was an international event. I saw representatives from a number of European countries as well as a number from South America. I chatted with the organizer of a conference scheduled for late June in Prague. He was expecting about 700 people; he says there are about 8000 FoxPro developers in what we used to call Czechoslovakia.

The trade show was packed with vendors and, often, packed with attendees. Several vendors said it was one of their best shows ever, financially. The desire of Fox developers to learn and grow was apparent as books (including mine) were selling like hotcakes.

Of course, in the FoxPro community, it's never all work and no play. Many of us got our first chance to see polo played at the annual DevCon party. After the real match, the Foxgang was given the chance to try golf cart polo – I hear the drivers were out for blood.

Several DevCon traditions perpetuated FoxPro culture. Jello shots (jello made with vodka) were served at the Polo club party. The hotel bar was taken over each night for the electric jam session, while those preferring a softer sound found it under the stars at the acoustic jam. In addition, the tradition of a toast to the late Tom Rettig continued, this time formally incorporated into one of the bonus sessions.

Maybe the best thing of all, though, was that not one person asked me whether VFP is dying. In fact, throughout the conference, I heard a number of people make comments along the lines of "VFP is on the rebound."

A language is dead without a culture, and the good news is that neither Visual FoxPro nor its culture is dead.

More Good News

On another front, Microsoft is making life easier for those who are still supporting or working in older versions. First, they've released a patch that resolves the problem with FoxPro 2.6 for Windows and fast processors. You can get it at http://support.microsoft.com/support/kb/articles/q186/8/34.asp.

With the Year 2000 just around the corner, Microsoft has also provided an update for VFP 5 that modifies its one non-Y2K-compliant feature, the LUPDATE() function. The new version handles LUPDATE() as in VFP 6, by using the directory entry for the file rather than the update date stored in the header. The URL for this one wasn't available as I wrote this, but you should be able to find it from http://msdn.microsoft.com/vfoxpro.

All in all, 1999 is a good time to be a Visual FoxPro developer.